

# **THE ZHOU (CHOU) DYNASTY**

## **1000 BCE – 221 BCE**



The Zhou Dynasty was established when the warrior-kings came down from the western mountains and defeated the Shang. When the Chou overthrew the last Shang king, they had to convince the people, especially the nobles, that they had the right to rule. The Chou ruled China for nearly 1000 years. The Chou told people that the gods in heaven had told them that they were to rule. This was called "The Mandate of Heaven", or heaven's orders. The Chou added that the gods had warned them that they would only rule as long as they were good rulers. If they became selfish, and thought of themselves first, before the people, that heaven would appoint another ruling family.

No one knows if the nobles in ancient China believed this fairy tale, but they most probably thought that the Mandate of Heaven sounded like a good idea. The nobles were tired of war between the Shang and the Chou. Most of the nobles would have the same life under Shang or Chou rule, and they knew it. As for the peasants, it did not matter to them which family ruled.

The Mandate of Heaven is based on four principles:

1. The right to rule is granted by Heaven.
2. There is only one Heaven therefore there can be only one ruler.
3. The right to rule is based on the virtue of the ruler.
4. The right to rule is not limited to one dynasty.



Under the Chou rule China began to become a large and powerful state. Chou leaders did not control China with a central government. They granted

special territories to families and allies. The families and allies had to give military service to the kings, but could rule their territory.

The Zhou established a feudal society in China. They established and maintained their own armies. It was the goal of each noble to please the emperor. Whenever the emperor required soldiers, the noble would provide him with peasants from the lands he ruled.

The Zhou Dynasty is recognized for numerous achievements as well. During their rule, advancements in astronomy were made, and the process for making ornate lacquer appeared in art. They made many technological advances and invented the crossbow. Skilled mechanics included potters, metalworkers, jewelers, and wheelwrights. Multiplication tables were also developed during the Zhou period.

The Zhou Dynasty was primarily based on an agricultural economy. Farming land was divided into tracks of nine square plots. The first large canals were built for irrigation and transportation.

During the Zhou Dynasty, Confucius was born (circa 551-479 BC) and he became one of the greatest teachers and philosophers of China. He and other scholars traveled throughout the country teaching people how to be in harmony with their world. Confucianism and Taoism thought began to teach people how to live a good life.



The Zhou Dynasty stressed the importance of family. Households in China often contained several generations of family members. These closely related people were called extended family. The center of authority was the oldest male. Women were considered lower status than men. In 300 BCE the Chinese established the practice of inheriting the family name along with a personal name.

Zhou emperors sacrificed to the Lord on High. Without the sacrifices, they believed great troubles would befall the empire. The Zhou empire collapsed after three centuries of warfare. Powerful feudal lords separated into seven warring states. This period in Chinese history would be known as the "Warring States" period.